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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000226

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/IR

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SUBJECT: COMFORTABLE IRANIANS COPE BY ACCOMMODATING

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Sylvia Reed Curran. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Iran Watcher met this week with two young Iranians from Esfahan, Azadeh and her brother Mohamad. They had traveled to Ashgabat for Azadeh's U.S. visa interview, and spoke about living, and coping, in Iran. Azadeh, who is 29 and single, manages a tour company in Esfahan that arranges foreign tours for middle and upper-class Iranian travelers. She has accompanied groups to western Europe and Russia, as well as Bulgaria and Ukraine. Iranians, she said, "love to travel," and those who can afford it use frequent trips abroad as a way of escaping the myriad restrictions that many have come to accept as a normal part of life in Iran. As a child in the 1980s, her family lived for a number of years in Dubai before returning to Esfahan, where her father owns a trading firm that exports marble, onyx and other building materials.

12. (C) Mohamad, who is several years older, works in the family firm. It exports building materials to a number of countries, including China, and Mohamad has traveled extensively in Asia and the Middle East. Friendly and outgoing, he makes friends wherever he travels. Once, during a trip to Beirut, while dining with friends at a restaurant, he said he met an Israeli, who invited him to visit Israel, including Jerusalem. According to Mohamad, the friend arranged their passage overland, so Mohamad was allowed to enter without a visa or having his passport stamped. (NOTE: As unusual as this story was, Iran Watcher found the interlocutor solidly credible, including his description of the visit. END NOTE). Mohamad said that he came away from the visit with a new respect and admiration for Israel and its people.

DRINKING, NIGHTCLUBS AND HIJAB

13. (C) Both Mohamad and Azadeh said they like living in Iran, wouldn't live anywhere else. Neither particularly supports Iran's opposition movement, although Mohamad can understand why it is calling for change: "Those of us who are a little older have learned to accept this regime and its restrictions on our lives," he said, "but the average 20-year old just doesn't understand why they should follow all these rules." Referring to his own life, he said, "I'm a Muslim, but shouldn't it be up to me whether I drink alcohol? It's a

personal decision. I also like to go to nightclubs once in a while, but that's also outlawed in Iran. And believe me, everyone is sick of the requirement that women wear hijab. It might seem unimportant, but it really does matter to people. People just resent all the control." Mohamad said that, like so many others, he copes with Iran's restrictive life by "getting on an airplane." Azadeh echoed that "women cannot even swim in Iran." Some beaches, including at the Caspian Sea, have segregated beaches, but only boys under the age of six are allowed to accompany their mothers to the "women's" beach, so most families find it too difficult and just give up trying to go swimming. She said she is constantly booking travel for Iranian families to Thailand and Malaysia, to which there are direct flights from Tehran, in addition to the popular destinations of Turkey and Dubai.

THE HIERARCHY OF FOREIGN STUDY OPTIONS

¶4. (C) Azadeh described Iranians as "obsessed" with foreign study, and said that parents will sacrifice almost anything to give their children the possibility of attending a university outside of Iran. She ascribes this to the belief that Iran's higher education system has deteriorated to the point where any school outside the country is considered preferable. (Her own sister recently moved to Australia so that her own children could attend high school and college there). Foreign degrees also carry more prestige in Iran, she said, in terms of future job prospects. Everyone's first choice is the U.S. If a student is unsuccessful in obtaining a U.S. visa, however, the second choice is the UK or Australia, then France or the Netherlands, and so on. Less

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desirable destinations, like Turkey or the former USSR, are still considered better than university in Iran, she said, noting that universities in Armenia are full of Iranian students.

¶5. (C) COMMENT: Our interlocutors, financially comfortable and focused on their careers, do not support Iran's opposition movement, nor are they fans of the regime. They represent a third group of Iranians, who are disinclined to engage in the debate raging in Iran over last June's election or the future of the country. For the most part, they enjoy their lives, have learned to live with the restrictions that govern them, and, in their own words, "let off steam" by traveling abroad. END COMMENT.
CURRAN